

Agata Hołobut

Perspective in print advertisements – a cognitive analysis

Streszczenie

Artykuł wykorzystuje instrumentarium wypracowane na gruncie językoznawstwa kognitywnego do analizy związków słowa i obrazu w reklamie prasowej. Odwołując się do koncepcji wymiarów obrazowania, zaproponowanej przez amerykańskiego językoznawcę Ronalda W. Langackera, porównuje strukturę semantyczną sloganów reklamowych oraz fotografii, z uwzględnieniem kryteriów perspektywy, selekcji oraz abstrakcji. Przedstawiona w artykule analiza wybranych reklam prasowych zaczerpniętych z popularnych polskich czasopism skoncentruje się na pierwszym z wymienionych wymiarów obrazowania, badając, jak autorzy reklam wykorzystują w celach perswazyjnych konflikt lub zbieżność perspektyw wyrażonych w obrazie wizualnym i językowym.

Introduction

Old as the hills, or at least as old as ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman papyri or Asian rock paintings, advertisements have been our faithful companions for ages, reflecting and shaping our customs, desires and needs. Defined prototypically as a type of communication intended “to persuade people to buy a particular product”,¹ they offer extensive research material to scholars interested in persuasion and manipulation. Though a mine of ideas, they are also a tough nut to crack because of their complex multimedia character, the analysis of which requires refined methodological tools.

In this article we refer to theoretical instruments offered by Cognitive Linguistics to analyse the interplay of verbal and visual components of print advertisements, focussing on one aspect of their semantic structure, that is, *perspective*. We shall look at selected examples of print ads currently available in Polish magazines (such as “Przekrój”, “Polityka”, “Wysokie Obcasy”, “Viva” or “Glamour”) in order

¹ G. Cook, *The Discourse of Advertising*, Routledge, London/New York 1992, p. 5.

to find out, what *points of view* are expressed by their visual and verbal messages and how these relate to each other. Do they coincide? Clash? Who are they most likely to belong to? How does their interplay contribute to the persuasive appeal of the advertisements?

The article begins with a short presentation of the analytical tools offered by Cognitive Linguistics and the explanation of the concept of perspective as understood within this framework. Subsequently, it presents an overview of the most interesting examples of print ads that illustrate the role of perspective as a persuasive device in advertising.

Tools

Print ads owe their persuasive, expressive and aesthetic appeal to the interaction of visual and verbal components. To explain this interaction, a set of relevant criteria needs to be found that would allow us to compare and contrast pictures and the accompanying slogans. We will derive these criteria from Cognitive Linguistics, an interdisciplinary approach to the study of language that has proved highly influential since the 1970s, focussing specifically on Ronald W. Langacker's conception of grammar as conventionalised imagery.²

Cognitive Linguists postulate that language is not autonomous. Our linguistic abilities are governed by the same principles as other cognitive abilities, such as perception, attention, categorisation and motor skills.³ We do not perceive reality "the way it is", but actively structure it. While thinking of a situation and presenting it to others, we can *construe* (i.e. organise, understand and verbalise) it in different ways, by means of "alternate images".⁴ Similarly to painters or photographers, we adopt a particular perspective from which to view the situation; we choose what to include in our picture; we focus on particular elements and decide how specific our portrayal should be.⁵ Langacker calls these parameters *dimensions of imagery* and distinguishes among them *selection*, *abstraction* and *perspective*. All these dimensions are reflected in language, which provides "an array of alternative images

² Cf e.g. R.W. Langacker, *Foundations of Cognitive Grammar. Vol. I. Theoretical Prerequisites*, Stanford UP, Stanford 1987; R. W. Langacker, *Concept, Image and Symbol. The Cognitive Basis of Grammar*, Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin/New York 1991; R.W. Langacker, *Foundations of Cognitive Grammar. Vol. II. Descriptive Application*, Stanford UP, Stanford 1991.

³ W. Croft and A.D. Cruse, *Cognitive Linguistics*, Cambridge UP, Cambridge 2004, p. 2.

⁴ R.W. Langacker, *Foundations of Cognitive Grammar. Vol. I. Theoretical Prerequisites*, Stanford UP, Stanford 1987, p. 110.

⁵ E. Tabakowska, *Językoznawstwo kognitywne w teorii i praktyce przekładu: oleodruk i symfonia na dwa fortepiany*, in: J. Konieczna-Twardzikowa and U. Kropiwek (eds.), *Między oryginałem a przekładem I*, Universitas, Kraków 1995, p. 33.

for describing a given scene”⁶ and can be thus defined as a “repertoire” of conventionalised images.⁷ From this repertoire, we select those tools that best express our conceptualisation. Our recipients use the same tools to rebuild and reconstruct the conceptualisation in their minds.

Implications for multimedia analysis

How does this theory contribute to our analysis? It allows us to characterise the semantic structure of visual images (e.g. photographs) and verbal images (e.g. slogans) according to the same set of criteria – Langacker’s dimensions of imagery. Below, we will consequently adopt this view and focus on the dimension of *perspective* embodied in the photographs and slogans of selected print ads.

The parameter of perspective is based on our “knowledge, belief and attitudes as well as our spatio-temporal location”.⁸ It subsumes our *here* and *now*, our views, emotions, attitudes and cultural heritage. Langacker distinguishes several components of this dimension of imagery. *Vantage point* and *orientation* account for the speaker’s spatial location in the world. They are responsible for semantic differences between such pairs of sentences as: *The cat is behind the tree* and *The cat is in front of the tree*. Another component of perspective, *directionality*, explains the difference between another pair: *The path led uphill* and *The path led downhill*. The fourth parameter is the degree of *subjectivity* or *objectivity* with which a particular situation is conceptualised. It concerns the relationship between the conceived situation and the *ground*, that is, the speech event, its spatio-temporal setting and participants – the speaker and the addressee. This parameter accounts for the degree to which the conceptualiser includes him/herself in the conceived situation. Is s/he only the subject of conceptualisation, or perhaps its object, too? The conceptualiser is maximally *subjective* if s/he remains “off-stage” as an “implicit, unselfconscious subject of conception”, who loses all awareness of him/herself, being “totally absorbed in apprehending the on-stage situation”.⁹ The object of conception is “salient, well-delimited and apprehended with great acuity”.¹⁰ By contrast, the ground (including the speaker) becomes more *objective* if it is included in the conceptualised

⁶ R. W. Langacker, *Concept, Image and Symbol. The Cognitive Basis of Grammar*, Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin/New York 1991, p. 12.

⁷ E. Tabakowska, *Językoznawstwo kognitywne a poetyka przekładu*, trans. A. Pokojka, Universitas, Kraków 2001, p. 48.

⁸ W. Croft and A.D. Cruse, *Cognitive Linguistics*, Cambridge UP, Cambridge 2004, p. 58.

⁹ R.W. Langacker, *Subjectification, grammaticalization, and conceptual archetypes*, in: A. Athanasiadou et al (eds), *Subjectification. Various Paths to Subjectivity*, Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin/New York 2006, p. 18.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

scene. This explains the difference between the following sentences: *There are people all around me* and *There are people all around*. In the former example, the speaker becomes an explicit object of conceptualisation (and is hence construed more *objectively*) whereas in the latter, the speaker remains implicit (and is hence construed more *subjectively*). Thus, Langacker's understanding of the notions of *subjectivity* and *objectivity* is highly idiosyncratic. Within his framework, the two terms do not characterise the meaning of a given expression as more or less tinged with the speaker's judgement or emotions. Instead, they refer to the role of a given entity in a construal relationship (that is, the extent to which it becomes an explicit object of conception)¹¹.

Quite significantly for our analysis, by remaining tacit and off-stage, the speaker encourages the addressee to adopt *his/her own*, internal point of view and perceive the world through his/her eyes.¹² On the other hand, by putting themselves on-stage and construing themselves more objectively, speakers treat themselves as other scene participants. This might involve accomplishing mental transfer and looking at themselves from *somebody else's* perspective. The question of whose perspective the speakers adopt, remains disturbingly open.

Perspective in print ads: basic assumptions

Below, we refer to Langacker's concept of perspective to analyse the interplay of visual and verbal images in selected print ads. We regard each print ad as a conceptualisation construed (i.e. conceived and expressed visually and verbally) by the Sender (i.e. the producer) and interpreted by the Recipient (i.e. the magazine reader) within a particular communicative event (i.e. involving specific spatio-temporal, emotional and cultural circumstances). Together, the Sender, Recipient and Setting constitute the ground, which can be more or less explicitly evoked in the advertisement.

As every model, the one adopted below involves considerable oversimplification. The most controversial assumption concerns the identification of the Sender with the producer (and – metonymically – with the product advertised). The British scholar Judith Williamson claims for example that advertising has no subject. "Obviously, people invent and produce adverts," she remarks, "but apart from the fact that they are unknown and faceless, the ad in any case does not claim to speak from them, it is not their speech".¹³ Another British scholar, Guy Cook, observes

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

¹² R. W. Langacker, *Obserwacje i rozważania na temat zjawiska subiektywizacji*, tłum. M. Majewska, Universitas, Kraków 2005, p. 54.

¹³ J. Williamson, *Decoding Advertisements. Ideology and Meaning in Advertising*, Marion Boyars, London/New York 1992, p. 14.

by contrast that advertising may involve many subjects: the producer, the advertising agency and the addressers: celebrities or fictional characters speaking to us from the magazine pages.¹⁴ However, for the purposes of our intermedial analysis, the identity of the Sender (be it the producer or the advertiser promoting a certain product) may remain underspecified.

We shall assume that both photographs and advertising slogans express a chosen perspective: vantage point, directionality and a chosen degree of subjectification. These perspectives either coincide or conflict with each other, producing various semantic effects. As concerns the verbal messages (the headlines or the clinchers), a *subjective* scene construal avoids any explicit reference to the ground, i.e. the Sender (the *I* or *we* of the producers and their products) and the Recipient (the *you*, *we*, *here* and *now* of the speech event). The advertising slogan *Together* is a case in point. An *objective* scene construal, on the other hand, refers more explicitly to the producer or the addressee. Such advertising slogans as *Think different*, *Just do it* or *We are the animals* are good examples of this category.

As concerns the visual messages (photographs), a maximally *subjective* scene construal avoids any explicit reference to the Sender, who is all eyes and forgets about him/herself and his/her products (which are his creation and hence – a part of him/herself). The world observed is maximally distinct from the viewer and hence – clearly visible. Moreover, a *subjective* composition of a photograph does not include any reference to the Recipient. There is no contact between the represented world and the readers. Models do not face the addressee directly, and they do acknowledge the context of communicative event in which they are participating. By contrast, a more *objective* scene construal in photography betrays the Sender's interest in him/herself. The company may, for example, include the merchandise in the picture frame, betray its positive attitude or evoke the Recipients' reciprocity (e.g. by presenting models who establish eye-contact or point at particular products). Obviously, the degree of subjectification in advertisements is scalar.

Why is it interesting to inspect the perspectives evoked by the pictures and slogans in advertisements? Persuasion can be defined as an effort to “encourage the other person to *share the view* of the user” by “presenting the best case possible”.¹⁵ Now, words and pictures confront the Recipient with different points of view. If these points of view are coherent, they will be more easy to adopt. If they are similar to the Recipient's own point of view, they will be all the more persuasive. The analysis of coinciding or clashing perspectives may help us to explain how advertisers “encourage the others to share their view”.

¹⁴ G. Cook, *The Discourse of Advertising*, Routledge, London/New York 1992, p. 2.

¹⁵ J. Mulholland, *Handbook of Persuasive Tactics. A Practical Language Guide*, Routledge, London/New York 1994, p. xvi.

Analysis

From a large collection of advertisements available in the recent issues of Polish magazines, we will select those that best illustrate the interplay of perspectives in pictures and slogans. The examples will be placed on the scale from the most subjective to the most objective scene construals, taking into account both visual and verbal components. As we shall see, implicit presence of the producer and the merchandise will gradually give way to more explicit self-references and more impudent appeals to the addressee.

Company's point of view

The first group of print ads seems to rank high on subjectification scale. Neither the Sender, nor the Recipient feature explicitly in the semantic make-up of the ad. The ground remains tacit and off-stage. What is being presented is a certain outlook on reality.

In the case of Eureko advertisements,¹⁶ it is the symbolic shape of a lighthouse or a tree that is in focus. These are rendered even more salient by the animated butterflies, which highlight the convergent perspective and direct the viewer's gaze. This is clearly a *point of view shot*, which "gives us the visual experience of seeing the world through someone else's point of view and participating in her or his subjectivity".¹⁷ The photographs invite us to see eye to eye with Eureko and adopt their outlook on reality.

Also the verbal component portrays the world subjectively. The headline reads: *Przyszłość ma solidne podstawy. Razem* ('Future has solid foundations. Together'). This is a generic statement evoking an unchangeable state. It does not include any explicit reference to the ground, that is, to the "here and now" of the speaker and the reader. Thus, the advertisement presents us with a coherently subjective vision of the world that can be identified with Eureko's vision. By remaining off-stage and refusing to dazzle the readers with direct appeals, it serves as a good example of a soft-selling proposition.

A different example of subjective scene construal is the Canon advertisement.¹⁸ Again, both the slogan and the picture construe the company as the subject and not the object of conceptualisation. The headline, *Freecoding oznacza pełną kontrolę* ('Freecoding means full control'), is a generic statement that refers to neither the Sender nor the Recipient. The visual image, on the other hand, imitates the real-

¹⁶ *Wysokie Obcasy*, 8 November 2008, p. 25; *Polityka*, 29 November 2008, p. 28.

¹⁷ P. Messaris, *Visual Persuasion. The Role of Images in Advertising*, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks/London/New Delhi 1997, p. 32.

¹⁸ *Film* 05 /2008, p. 5.

life experience of a parent trying to photograph his/her child's first driving efforts. The realistic choice of high vertical camera angle and short viewing distance suggest that this is another *point of view shot*. We can guess that we are looking at the world through the lens of the Canon camera. Thus, the company's point of view merges with the parent's point of view and – since we are invited to see reality through the parent's eyes – also with our point of view. By skilfully exploiting the potential of subjective scene construal, the authors made us naturally adopt Canon's way of looking at reality.

The last illustration of a consistently subjective scene construal is Onet's advertisement.¹⁹ It exploits the opposition of perspectives that shape the visual and verbal images. The photograph presents a carefully staged shot of a wedding cake with two figurines of a homosexual couple on top. Unlike the previous examples, this particular photograph is certainly *not* a point-of-view shot, which imitates our typical visual experience. The choice of viewing distance, high camera angle and careful lighting all imply *a non-perspectival* picture taken by an impassive "professional photographer" who knows which elements to highlight and which to downplay. The perspectives evoked by the verbal messages, on the other hand, are those of highly emotional fictive characters: Anitta and Ciotka Klotka. Their comments read: *Oni mówią TAK ja mówię NIE !!!!!* ('They say YES and I say NO') and *Każdy ma prawo do szczęścia* ('Everybody has the right to be happy'). How do the verbal and visual perspectives interact? How do they relate to Onet's point of view? The company construes itself as highly subjective and the situation – as highly objective. The distance between the viewer and the presented situation – that is, the wedding cake – is iconically emphasised by the non-perspectival, professional framing. It implies that the way in which Onet presents news is unbiased and competent. They present reality the way a professional photographer presented the wedding cake. Although the verbal messages are all emotionally involved (Anitta construes herself objectively by explicitly mentioning herself in her comment), they clearly express the characters' points of view, dispassionately quoted by the Sender.

All the aforementioned advertisements are characterised by subjective scene construal despite the fact that they achieve this effect by different visual and verbal means: subjective shots in the case of the first two examples and a non-perspectival shot in the case of the third; generic statements in the case of the first two advertisements and emotional outbursts in the third. In each, the company remains tacit and off-stage, presenting its vision of the world and inviting the readers to share it without any explicit command or encouragement.

¹⁹ *Polityka* 49/2008, p. 61.

Artist's point of view

Another group of advertisements is characterised by a slightly higher degree of objectification. It belongs to a separate genre of print ads known as upper-class fashion advertisements. Looking at the first example, the advertisement of the Solar fashion company,²⁰ we can immediately recognise some of the most important generic features of this group. First of all, the absence of a headline or a clincher, except for the company logo, which downplays the role of the verbal component and directs the addressee's attention to the visual image. The contribution of the linguistic message is minimal: no appeal, no command, no selling proposition. The picture, by contrast, plays a crucial role here. The visual scene construal is slightly more objective, because it includes the company's products – selected items of clothing – within the picture frame. Thus, in a sense, Solar is looking at itself by looking at its design. Yet, the products are not maximally objectified, because they are not presented as well-delimited and salient. On the contrary, they are as if noticed by chance, as elements of a more complex situation. What really comes to the fore is the unusual, counter-intuitive perspective imposed on this situation, which violates our real-life interpersonal experience: we can see the woman's back, but her hair and legs do not fit the picture frame. The model manifestly refrains from establishing any contact with the viewer and although she is presumably wearing Solar's clothes, they are not in clear focus. What is crucial here is the unique and poetic composition of the scene. The way of looking at the world becomes more important than the world itself.

Thus, high fashion ads embody a more objective scene construal. The Sender betrays his/her presence by including the advertised design in the picture. S/he also reveals his/her presence by the unusual way of looking at the world. S/he does not lose his/her self-awareness. On the contrary – deeply aware of his/her taste, s/he carefully arranges all the elements of the scene. The same principles hold for other examples within this category – that is, Emmanuel Zegna's²¹ and Gosia Baczyńska's advertisements.²² They also illustrate another important feature of high fashion ads: the ostentatious refusal on the part of the models to establish direct eye contact with the Recipient and thus refer to the ground of the communicative situation. On rare occasions when this happens, the models are either presented from a low-angle perspective which renders them powerful and intimidating, or from an unusual, skewed perspective, which brings to mind art photography.²³

²⁰ „Wysokie Obcasy”, 8 November 2008, p. 27.

²¹ *Viva*, 24/2008, p. 37.

²² *In style* December 2008, p. 70–71.

²³ P. Messaris, *Visual Persuasion. The Role of Images in Advertising*, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks/London/New Delhi 1997, p. 86.

What is the persuasive effect of these perspectival effects? They allow fashion ads to subvert the existing “salesmanship” conventions. As the American scholar Paul Messaris points out, “by looking down on their viewers, the models in high-fashion ads offer reassurance that the world displayed in the ad is indeed superior to the one inhabited by the upwardly mobile consumer”.²⁴ These advertisements certainly shun any reference to the Recipient or the advertising context, construing them as off-stage and implicit. The company’s presence is revealed via the seemingly incidental, but highly eye-catching presentation of its products – which usually involves blurs, lack of sharp focus or off-balance compositions. As Messaris remarks, such an “iconoclastic style can give an advertising image some of the high-status aura that emanates from high art”.²⁵ Thus, in a sense, the company is looking at itself from a unique, unfamiliar perspective of a professional artist, thereby implying that this point of view coincides with its own vision.

Beast’s point of view

Another interesting example increases the level of objectification by including a deictic verbal component. Let us take a look at Wrangler’s intriguing advertising campaign *We are the animals*.²⁶ The visual image presents a nocturnal scene, in which the atmosphere of deepening gloom seems to prevail over the main protagonists – strange-looking wild people, crouching on the bank of the pond. The advertisement confronts us with a subjective, long shot of a group of figures, who are out of focus and hardly visible in the dark. The uncomfortable viewing distance and the low-angle view suggest that we are looking at them from the point of view of a strange nocturnal creature like themselves. The slogan reads: *We are the animals*. How can we characterise the degree of subjectification chosen for this multimedia message? Wrangler confronts us with an obscured view of its products. The blurred jeans are hardly recognisable in the picture. What comes to the fore in it is the strenuous physical effort to see. The products are presented from a point of view that is difficult to define – strange, inhuman and disturbing. By choosing a subjective camera shot instead of a staged, non-perspectival photograph, the producers induce us to adopt this enigmatic perspective. The slogan reinforces this mechanism. It evokes the mysterious collective *we*. On the one hand, it can be interpreted as referring to the participants of the communicative event (i.e. the company and the Recipients). On the other hand, it may also refer to another deictic centre – the group of models in the picture. Because of this ambiguity, we are free to interpret the statement as either referring to ourselves or to the represented

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 40.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 86.

²⁶ “Glamour”, 11/2008, p. 57.

world. Thus, instead of being forced, we are softly induced to see “eye to eye” with the company.

Professional’s point of view

The Audi advertisement²⁷ illustrates a higher degree of objectification than the previous examples. The visual image presents the product with utmost precision by means of a carefully-staged, non-perspectival shot. We can see almost every detail of the glistening car speeding along the motorway. The product is maximally objective, viewed by someone totally absorbed in its assets and heedless of his or her own identity. Audi is conceptualising the car from the point of view of a “professional” photographer – perfectionistic, transparent, able to present the product in the most favourable light. The verbal image – *Potężna jednostka mocy* (‘the mighty unit of power’) – does not contain any explicit reference to the ground, that is, the company or the Recipient and the communicative situation and hence embodies subjective scene construal. However, it obviously refers to the product, passing positive axiological judgement on it. In a sense, the verbal image echoes the perspective imposed on the visual image. It combines maximal focus on the product and its virtues with the anonymity of the conceptualiser.

Macho’s point of view

Let us now take a look at an advertisement which combines high degree of objectification, with a point of view that must considerably differ from the company’s. It can be hence considered as highly manipulative. Tally Weil’s print ad *Love me*²⁸ strikes the viewer with the subservient, provocative, slightly child-like position of the model, emphasised by a high camera angle. The woman is wearing Tally Weil’s clothes as she gazes at the viewer. The visual scene construal is highly objective. The elements of the ground are evoked in two parallel ways. The Sender’s presence in the conceptualised scene is revealed by explicit presentation of the product. The Recipient’s presence is revealed by the model’s direct gaze at the camera. This effect is reinforced by the verbal appeal, *Love me*, directed point-blank at the addressee. In this advertisement, the producer is apparently looking at his product through somebody else’s eyes. Judging from the viewing distance and high-camera angle, it is a conventionalised point of view of a “hungry male” onlooker. This is clearly not the outlook shared by the company. The ad manipulates the readers into adopting this contrived point of view in order to elicit strong emotions. It may presumably touch the male readers’ masculine instincts and develop quite complex responses in female onlookers. As Messaris points out, females confronted with similar images

²⁷ “Przekrój”, 27 November 2008, p. 5.

²⁸ “Hot Moda & Shopping” 2008, 9 (27), p. 27.

are forced to adopt a subjective point of view of a man, while simultaneously identifying with the model and “seeing themselves as a man might see them”.²⁹

Nut’s point of view

At the end of this short overview, let us take a closer look at the Bakalland advertisement,³⁰ which is a visual and conceptual paradox. We are confronted with a subjective camera shot of two voracious people, presented from the point of view of the nuts they are about to devour. The merchandise is construed both subjectively and objectively. The nuts feature primarily as the subject of conceptualisation and the world – that is, the famished consumers – as the object of conceptualisation. On the other hand, the product is also partly objectified – as the remaining nuts in the packet are also clearly visible. Subjective scene construal encourages the viewer to adopt the perspective of the implicit ground – that is, the nuts. On the other hand, the slogan objectifies the Recipient by explicitly addressing him/her and asking him/her to identify with the famished consumers. The advertisement owes its persuasive appeal to the clash of presented viewpoints and the fluctuation of identities that the viewer is asked to adopt.

Conclusion

Ronald W. Langacker’s dimensions of imagery are a useful tool in the semantic analysis of multimedia messages. The presented overview of print advertisements demonstrates how subjective scene construal encourages the Recipients to adopt the Sender’s point of view and naturally share the company’s vision. The proper use of pictures and slogans presenting a high degree of subjectification can therefore make an effective soft-selling strategy. On the other hand, the objective portrayal of the producer and the merchandise forces the Recipients to adopt other points of view, which are more or less easy to accept.

²⁹ P. Messaris, *Visual Persuasion. The Role of Images in Advertising*, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks/London/New Delhi 1997, p. 41.

³⁰ *Film* 11/2008, p. 53.